



HOW TO...

Move from film to digital

If you want to upgrade your Box Brownie to something a bit more modern, there's nothing to fear.

Mike Bedford tells you what to look out for and highlights the benefits of going digital

Digital cameras use similar terminology and controls to film cameras. This makes it easy for anyone to make the transition to digital photography. However, there are some differences, so here's how to reap the benefits of going digital while avoiding the pitfalls.

THE ECONOMIC BENEFIT

Digital cameras continue to fall in price, but they're still more expensive than equivalent film cameras, especially when you look at enthusiasts' models with advanced manual controls. However, the great thing about digital cameras is that they're much cheaper to run. You can experiment to your heart's content without worrying about film and processing costs. A large-capacity memory card lets you take lots of shots of a subject – just as professional photographers do with film – and pick the best one later.

There is a danger, though. Recognising that mistakes don't cost anything, some digital camera users abandon the consideration they used to put into each shot when using film. If you've honed your skills on film, make sure you put just as much care and attention into each digital shot.

USE THE CORRECT VIEWFINDER

A film camera has just one viewfinder but digital cameras usually have two. Each has its advantages and disadvantages, which you'll need to understand to make the best use of your camera's facilities.

Digital SLRs have a pentaprism optical viewfinder, just like film SLRs. This shows the scene through the camera's lens, which means you see the same view that will appear in the photo, complete with any focus adjustments. Optical viewfinders give a large view of the subject, filling most of your field of vision, so they're perfect for composing shots on a digital SLR. This is fortunate as digital SLRs' LCD screens can't be used for composing shots, as light captured by the lens is sent to the optical viewfinder rather than the image sensor.

Compact digital cameras give users a choice of two viewfinders that can be used for different situations. The optical viewfinder provides a large preview of shots and has its own zoom function that replicates the zoom of the main camera lens. However, as the view it shows is different to that of the camera lens, it can't show focus settings. It also results in a problem called parallax error, where the offset position of the viewfinder compared to the

lens means they have slightly different views. If you're shooting close-up this error is exaggerated, and could cause you to miss the subject entirely.

The main advantage of the LCD screen is that it shows exactly the same view that will appear in your photo. This makes framing shots easy, but it also has other advantages. Focus is reproduced on the screen, so you'll know when the autofocus has locked to the wrong part of the image. You can also use it as a focusing aid if you're focusing manually and it can help you to check the depth of field in aperture priority mode. LCD screens can even preview exposure settings. This can be useful when choosing manual exposure settings or, in the automatic modes, to make sure that the camera's metering system hasn't been fooled by unusual conditions such as a bright background.

Unfortunately, the size and quality of many cameras' LCD screens can make these kinds of observations tricky. Their low resolutions make it hard to tell if a shot is in focus. Bright environments can make the LCD difficult to see, especially when you're trying to make careful exposure adjustments. LCD panels are just a couple of inches wide so, when the camera is held at a normal viewing distance, the scene will appear much smaller than through the optical viewfinder. Holding the camera in this position may increase camera shake, and the LCD panel also drains batteries very quickly.

There's no right or wrong answer to using the optical viewfinder or LCD screen, but our best advice is to bear in mind each one's strengths and weaknesses and use them in combination. Perhaps use the optical viewfinder to find an attractive composition, but then refer to the LCD screen to check the exposure and fine-tune the framing.

FILM SPEEDS

Another difference between film and digital cameras is film speed. The concept is the same for both: a low film speed requires comparatively long exposures or large apertures but produces a pin-sharp image, while a high film speed requires shorter exposures or smaller apertures, so it's useful in low-light conditions but the end result isn't as clear because the photograph appears grainy.

Film cameras achieve this by using film that reacts quite quickly to light. Digital cameras don't have interchangeable light sensors, but they can use a short exposure time to take a dark picture and then brighten it by processing the captured image. By doing so, digital cameras emulate film speeds fairly accurately, but the great advantage of digital is that you can change the film speed on a shot-by-shot basis. If you make the move to digital, you can experiment with film speed far more easily than you'll be used to. **CS**

WHICH VIEWFINDER SHOULD I USE?



◀▲ The optical viewfinder (main photograph) might not give a perfectly framed shot but it certainly provides a clearer view than that from the LCD panel (above)



◀ Using the optical viewfinder (left), our intended subject has been missed almost entirely, but using the LCD panel (right) gives a perfectly framed photo